

Steve Cunningham Confident In Germany

Written by Robert Mladinich
Friday, 28 December 2007 19:00

In January 2006, cruiserweight Steve Cunningham of Philadelphia blasted out Lloyd Bryan in five rounds on the undercard of the Zab Judah-Carlos Baldomir title bout at Madison Square Garden.

Afterwards he told a gaggle of reporters that it was his destiny to become a world champion, and that when he did all of the hard work he put into his career would pay off.

“I always listen to the little voice in my head, and that voice is telling me that I’m going to be the champion of the world,” he said. “I can do anything I put my mind to.”

Cunningham has seen his lofty dreams come to fruition, but it has been a circuitous road to the title. In his very next fight after beating Bryan, in November 2006, he traveled to Poland to take on once-beaten local hero Krzysztof Wlodarczyk for the vacant IBF title.

Although the American judge scored the bout 119-109, the two European officials, one of whom was Polish, saw the local guy winning by three and four points each.

Distracted but undeterred, the never-say-die Cunningham returned to Poland seven months later, in May 2007, to dethrone Wlodarczyk by majority decision.

He now travels to Germany to take on the challenge of another local hero named Marco Huck on Saturday, December 29th. A native of the former Yugoslavia who now lives in the Deutschland, the hard-punching, 23-year-old Huck is 19-0 (14 KOs).

While the 31-year-old champion is 20-1 (10 KOs), and has beaten such notables as South African strongman Sebastian Rothmann, Guillermo Jones and Kelvin Davis, the challenger is heavily favored to win.

No names on Huck’s record are recognizable to American fans, but he did beat previously undefeated Vadim Tokarev, who was 23-0-1, in a title elimination bout. Still, the odds, which are as high as 4-1 at some sports books, can only be attributed to the fact that so many notoriously bad decisions are rendered in Germany.

Although Cunningham would much rather be fighting on American soil, preferably on HBO or Showtime, he is not the least bit concerned with geography.

“He’ll bring his best and I’ll bring my best, and I will be victorious,” said the seemingly unflappable Cunningham.

Cunningham’s faith in his ring abilities is enhanced by his immense belief in God. He does all of the hard work in the gym, and leaves the rest up to the Almighty. He also draws great strength from other sources as well.

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Among them are his close-knit family, which includes his wife Elizabeth and two children: son Steve Jr., who is 5, and daughter Kennedy, who is 2. Kennedy was born with hypo-plastic left heart syndrome, which is an underdeveloped left side of that organ.

For her entire life she has been in the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, where she is now on the last, and least dangerous, of the three surgeries required to correct her condition.

The way Cunningham sees things, if his daughter can battle such a debilitating disease in the hospital, a fight in the ring for him is like a walk in the park.

"She's the real fighter in the family," said Cunningham. "It's not me. I want to get her autograph when she gets older and is all better. If she can fight and win her battle, there is no man on Earth that can beat me."

Another great source of inspiration for Cunningham is the four years he spent in the U.S. Navy. It was there that he became the sensible and responsible adult that he is, as well as where he learned to box.

While serving aboard the U.S.S. America and the U.S.S. Enterprise his job was to refuel aircraft of all kinds. With few off-duty options, he made his way to a small boxing gym in 1996. A quick study, he beat the light heavyweight champion of the entire Navy in his very first bout.

"My opponent's captain was there, so there was a lot of pride involved," said Cunningham. "He was expected to take advantage of me. A lot of people were surprised when I beat him, but I wasn't. When I begin something new, whatever it is, I want to be the best at it. I'm willing to work very hard to become the best."

After his 1998 discharge, Cunningham moved to Atlanta because he heard it was a great place to jumpstart a boxing career. The Olympic Games had been held there two years earlier, and the amateur boxing scene was flourishing.

He won the National Golden Gloves title later that year, and turned pro in 2000. He honed his skills at whistle stops and way stations in Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee.

When he signed with promoter Don King and found himself winning a tougher than expected decision against Joseph Avinongya at the Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas in July 2002, he knew he was on the right career path.

"I realized I wasn't in South Carolina anymore," said the champ, whose nickname is U.S.S. Cunningham in deference to his naval experience.

While Cunningham realizes the importance of having a connected promoter, he has no aversion to promoting himself. He is affable and friendly with his fans, easily accessible to the press, calls back when he says he will call, has a cell phone number that is not continuously changed, and has an active web site to keep everything and everyone up to date.

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Since being crowned a champion, Cunningham has appeared on numerous television and radio programs. He has also been honored by the legendary Blue Horizon, spoken at dinners for a flag football league, attended community center openings with the likes of former heavyweight champions Michael Spinks and Joe Frazier, spoke at a college sports camp, attended block parties, and made himself available for just about every media request that has come his way.

While it is obvious that Cunningham is on solid ground in every aspect of his life, he and his wife are sensible enough to not put all their eggs in one basket, especially a basket made of ring earnings. To that end, they have recently purchased an already established pizzeria which is doing very well under their ownership.

There is no doubt that Cunningham very much likes being a champion. Huck, however, has plans to snatch his title and pursue his own championship legacy. When he heard that Cunningham had opened the pizzeria a few weeks prior to their scheduled fight, he said that after he beat him he'd have plenty of time to tend to his new business.

Huck is talking like he has this win in the bank. But anyone who goes into the ring with Cunningham and thinks its going to be easy pickings better think again. I can't imagine that Huck would be foolhardy to believe he's going to win as easy as he says he is, but he just might be.

If there is no tomfoolery involved with the judging, which is a big if in Germany, this corner says Cunningham leaves the country with his first successful title defense under his belt.

Sometimes nice guys do finish first, especially when they work as long and hard as Cunningham has.

"I don't take shortcuts and I don't expect anything I didn't earn," he said. "There aren't many fighters that work harder than me. If I was another boxer, the last guy I'd want to fight is me."

Cunningham's web site address is: usscunningham.com